Introduction

Kingdoms in Peril is an epic historical novel covering the five hundred and fifty years of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, from the civil wars and invasions that marked the birth of a new regime in 771 B.C.E. to the unification of China in 221 B.C.E. This period saw the numerous states that made up the Zhou confederacy riven by intense and intractable conflict as they lurched from one crisis to the next. Every concept of what constituted a civilized society was tested again and again through centuries of political instability, and any momentary peace was soon threatened by the relentless intriguing of ministers, eunuchs, and harem favorites. It was a time when political life was punctuated with poisonings, assassinations, and sinister conspiracies, and those who escaped other murderous attacks might still fall victim to warfare or the rioting populace. As old certainties crumbled and hierarchies collapsed, it was no longer possible to maintain traditional social norms, and new opportunities opened up for the intelligent and able. Men and women were quick to take advantage of this, testing the boundaries and seeking self-advancement in ways that would have been impossible in a more stable environment. As an international market opened up for talented individuals, clever men increasingly sought to build careers abroad, secure in the knowledge that their social and ethnic background would not be held against them in a foreign country. Women too resisted traditional assumptions that their sphere should be confined to childrearing at home, and found that they were now expected—at least at an elite level—to be able to provide sagacious advice, arrange

murders, defuse political conspiracies, and, in the event of a crisis, potentially even to take over the running of the country.

Kingdoms in Peril was written in the 1640s, at the very end of the Ming dynasty, by the great novelist Feng Menglong (1574–1646). An expert in the history of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, he was inspired to write this novel by reading an earlier work on the same subject: *Tales of the States* (*Lieguo zhi*) by Yu Shaoyu (active 1522–73). Horrified by the many mistakes and anachronisms this book contained, Feng Menglong decided to produce a new and improved account of the same historical events, which would explore the careers and personalities of the many remarkable individuals who lived through and defined this crucial era of Chinese history. In the course of the one hundred and eight chapters of the complete novel, he documents the collapse of the Zhou confederacy during the Spring and Autumn period (771–475 B.C.E.) and the slow rebuilding of civil society during the Warring States era (475–221 B.C.E.), which culminated in the unification of China under the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (r. 246–221 B.C.E. as king; r. 221–210 B.C.E. as emperor). Thus, overall, this novel describes a grand arc, from stability to chaos and back again. As a novel about politics, much of the narrative in *Kingdoms in Peril* concentrates on the exercise of power. During the Eastern Zhou dynasty, there were two words in use to cover different aspects of the concept of power. *Quan* was used for the power that comes from quantifiable resources: the size of the army, the financial reserves in the treasury, the extent of the tax base, stockpiles of weapons, armor, and so on. *Shi,* on the other hand, refers to power that comes from taking advantage of the opportunities provided by a developing situation. It is the interplay between *quan* and *shi* that provides many of the most dramatic incidents in the history of this period, and therefore of this novel. Power that comes from circumstantial advantage could be utilized in all sorts of different contexts: whether it is a silver-tongued diplomat persuading a king to accept a disadvantageous treaty; a cunning general tricking the enemy commander into an unfavorable situation by playing to his prejudices; or a rival convincing a neglected wife to spy on her husband to set him up for assassination—these chinks in the armor allowed for stunning reversals of fortune.

Whether they were making history or being crushed by it, the characters of *Kingdoms in Peril* are presented in a way that reminds us of

their human qualities. There are no heroes and villains here, just flawed individuals trying their best to survive in often impossible circumstances, all too often discovering that the choices available to them ranged from bad to worse. One of the key features of this novel is the emphasis on the terrible conflicts many of its characters faced—raised in an ethical system that valued loyalty, justice, benevolence, and filial duty and yet placed in circumstances in which they were torn between their duty to the ruler or the country, and their love for family and friends. Regardless of whether they were monarchs, aristocrats, hereditary ministers, or clan leaders, members of the Eastern Zhou ruling elite almost always had complicated private lives, surrounded as they were by wives, concubines, mistresses, cronies, bodyguards, hangers-on, and hordes of servants, male and female. The ties of affection created within these households did not necessarily run neatly according to rank and status, where sons of the main wife held priority in the inheritance, followed by the children of concubines, while illegitimate offspring were generally treated little better than slaves. Although this social hierarchy might appear rigid, it could always be overturned by the intelligent, while ruthless ambition and violence occasionally found themselves tempered by loving relationships strong enough to withstand the brutality of the age. *Kingdoms in Peril* has long been recognized as a masterpiece for its exploration of the personalities of individuals caught up in momentous historical events.

KINGDOMS IN PERIL: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kingdoms in Peril opens with a brief account of the political problems at the end of the Western Zhou dynasty, which were allayed with the accession of the highly competent King Xuan of Zhou (r. 827–782 B.C.E.). However, though the reign of King Xuan offered a temporary respite, the dynasty would collapse in a civil war during the reign of his son, King You (r. 781–771 B.C.E.). The fall of the Western Zhou dynasty is today understood as the result of multiple factors: natural disasters created enormous social disruption and forced many people to become refugees; attacks by powerful northern nomadic peoples increased; and the ensuing humanitarian crisis was exacerbated by an

incompetent government riven with internal dissension. However, this is not how ancient Chinese people regarded these events. For them, the key figure in the fall of the Western Zhou was an accursed woman, Bao Si, the favorite slave-girl of the last king. She was believed to be the living embodiment of an ancient malediction, imposed upon the people of Zhou by the Bao lords, and hence predestined to bring about the fall of the dynasty. As a result, Bao Si came to represent a counterpart and antithesis to Hou Ji, the mythical founder of the Zhou royal house. Just as Hou Ji was born after his mother stepped in the footprint of a giant, and survived thanks to the protection of various birds and animals when his mother attempted to abandon her baby, Bao Si was born after her mother stepped in the footprint of a magical turtle, and survived an attempt to drown her as a baby through the intervention of the local wildlife. To an ancient Chinese audience, Heaven created Hou Ji to bring civilization to the world as the ancestor of the Zhou ruling house, and Bao Si was sent down to destroy everything that they had worked so hard to create.

In the year 771 B.C.E., Crown Prince Yijiu of Zhou, furious at having been dispossessed by his father, launched a rebellion against him. In the ensuing carnage King You and Bao Si were killed, together with vast numbers of government officials. The ordinary inhabitants of the capital were massacred, women were raped, and the city was pillaged by the crown prince's self-declared supporters. Faced with a burned palace and a ruined city, the newly enthroned Yijiu, now King Ping of Zhou (r. 770–720 B.C.E.), decided to move the seat of government permanently to the secondary capital at Luoyang. The immediate consequences of this decision were not necessarily apparent; however, it would gradually become clear that these events had completely destroyed the authority of the Zhou kings. With the center crumbling, violence began to spiral out of control. Over the course of the next few centuries, the states of the Zhou confederacy suffered social collapse and political cataclysm, from which no one would emerge unscathed. The violence spread outwards from each epicenter like the ripples when a stone is dropped into water. An assassination in one state would lead to further revenge killings, sucking more and more people into the maelstrom. The resulting political vacuum would result in popular uprisings, innocent people were slain, and foreign enemies invaded. Occasionally, an individual ruler and his ministers would try

to make a stand and preserve the peace, but all too soon, that regime would pass away and the fighting would break out again. At the same time, centrifugal forces ripped the Central States apart, as power increasingly came to be vested in regimes more and more remote from the old center: the Zhou Royal Domain. This was a function of the way in which territory had been allocated since the founding of the Western Zhou in 1045 B.C.E. The political center consisted mainly of city-states, with limited opportunities for expansion. Over time it proved to be the peripheral regimes—sometimes even foreign kingdoms—that showed they had the capacity to expand rapidly, conquering their neighbors and recruiting ever vaster armies. The precise number of states within the Zhou confederacy at the beginning of the Eastern Zhou dynasty is not known, since not all are mentioned in surviving historical records and some appear only in inscriptions on ceremonial bronze vessels that have been excavated in modern times. However, there are thought to have been at least twelve hundred states in 771 B.C.E., at the beginning of the dynasty. By the end of the Spring and Autumn period in 475 B.C.E., these had been consolidated into seven vast countries, whose rulers were powerful enough to declare themselves kings. During the Warring States era, it became increasingly obvious to everyone that unification was necessary in order to bring the violence to an end. In the process, the seven kings of the Warring States would fight each other until there was only one left—Qin—which proceeded to unify China.

This abridged edition of *Kingdoms in Peril* consists of nine key storylines taken from the novel. The first story, titled "The Curse of the Bao Lords," contains the opening three chapters of Feng Menglong's tale, and describes the fall of the Western Zhou dynasty and the murder of the last king and his family. This story closely follows the standard histories of this period, but in recent years the events surrounding the death of King You and the installation of King Ping have been thoroughly reevaluated in the light of archaeologically excavated material dating to this period and ancient bamboo texts discovered through tomb robbery. These new sources suggest that the conflict after the death of King You was much worse than previously believed, and it took approximately two decades after the murder of the last king of the Western Zhou before his son and heir was able to take the throne as King Ping. Indeed, if the *Annalistic History* (*Xinian*), a text

donated in 2008 to Qinghua University, is correct, the crown prince's claim to the throne was disputed by one of King You's younger brothers, Prince Yuchen, and it was only after a prolonged civil war that the Eastern Zhou dynasty was finally established.

The second story is titled "An Incestuous Affair at the Court of Qi" and documents the troubled lives of Lord Xiang of Qi (r. 697–686 B.C.E.), his sister Lady Wen Jiang (d. 673 B.C.E.), and the affair between the two which brought about the murder of her husband, Lord Huan of Lu (r. 711–694 B.C.E.). Lu and Qi were the two most important states on the Shandong peninsula, and political marriages were frequently arranged between members of these ruling houses in order to ensure peace within the region. When Lord Xiang of Qi ordered the killing of Lord Huan of Lu, this seriously destabilized the governments of both states and entailed terrible consequences: Lord Xiang was murdered in his turn, plunging Qi into civil war as his heirs fought among themselves, while Lord Huan of Lu's son, Lord Zhuang (r. 693–662 B.C.E.), would find himself deeply troubled by being forced to marry the daughter of the man who murdered his father in order to maintain good relations between the two countries. The removal of Lord Xiang from the scene would have particularly significant political repercussions, because the conflict following his demise would allow an unexpected candidate to seize power: the Honorable Xiaobai, Lord Huan of Qi (r. 685–643 B.C.E.). A highly intelligent, ambitious ruler, Lord Huan of Qi would proceed to dominate the political life of the Central States for a generation and was widely admired for his personal generosity and strong principles, the enlightened government he instituted at home, and the commitment he showed to keeping the peace abroad. Lord Huan of Qi would be honored for his achievements by being appointed as hegemon (*ba*), an extraordinary title that recognized the most powerful nobles of the Spring and Autumn period.

The third story, "The Wicked Stepmother, Lady Li Ji," turns to the political troubles of the state of Jin (based in what is today Shanxi Province in northern China) in the time of Lord Xian of Jin (r. 676–651 B.C.E.). The court of Jin seems to have been an unusually louche one, with Lord Xian producing children with one of his father's wives, as well as with a series of junior wives and concubines who bore the same clan name as himself—relationships which would have been considered incestuous in the Eastern Zhou dynasty. Some of his many

children would prove every bit as tiresome as their father, but others were to become famous for their moral values and the loving affection that they showed to each other, regardless of parentage. This particular tale focuses on the terrible malevolence directed by Lord Xian and his favorite wife, Lady Li Ji (d. 651 B.C.E.), towards his son Shensheng (d. 655 B.C.E.), who had earlier been appointed as the heir to the marquisate of Jin. The way Shensheng was tormented by his father and stepmother until finally he committed suicide has traditionally been cited as the classic argument against taking filial piety and obedience to parents too far. Although filial reverence and respect for senior family members was always strongly promoted by Confucian thinkers, and has frequently been presented as a quintessential value within Chinese society, discussion of what happened in Jin offers a way of balancing this dominant cultural narrative. A good son and a good brother, Shensheng suffered a dreadful death in order to spare his father from pain. His fate was undeserved and resulted in two decades of serious political upheavals in Jin, during which countless people were killed. It was not until his half-brother, the Honorable Chonger, was finally installed as Lord Wen of Jin (r. 636–628 B.C.E.) that the situation gradually began to stabilize.

In "The Fight for Lady Xia Ji," the action moves to the minor state of Chen, located in what is now Henan Province. This is where the famously beautiful Lady Xia Ji, the daughter of Lord Mu of Zheng (r. 628–606 B.C.E.), lived as a widow following the death of her first husband, Xia Zhengshu. The lovely Lady Xia Ji is here portrayed both as a licentious woman, engaged in affairs with a couple of different grandees in Chen, and as a victim of sexual harassment, since she is forced into a relationship with Lord Ling of Chen (r. 613–599 B.C.E.) against her will, because she and her son are entirely in his power. When her son grew up and discovered what had been going on, he murdered Lord Ling. This killing provided King Zhuang of Chu (r. 613–591 B.C.E.) with an excuse to invade the state of Chen. Prevented from installing Lady Xia Ji in his own harem by the impassioned remonstrance of one of his government ministers, Wu Chen, King Zhuang ordered that she be married off to a minor official. This second husband, however, did not last long, and in the end Lady Xia Ji eloped with the very minister who complained about her being taken into the Chu king's harem. The fate of Lady Xia Ji is indicative of the

way in which elite women during the Spring and Autumn period were increasingly being treated as trophies: her beauty was used to justify and excuse sexual exploitation. Passed from one man to another, married off on a whim, she appears to have had no control over her own destiny. However, the portrayal of Lady Xi Ji in *Kingdoms in Peril* is taken straight from the *Scandalous History of Zhulin* (*Zhulin yeshi*), a late Ming dynasty erotic novel, and so this account also incorporates some of the themes frequently found in such writings. Although on one level she is subjected to horrific exploitation, Lady Xia Ji, like other Chinese femmes fatales, is able to turn the tables on the men who abuse her: she has learned the techniques of sexual vampirism and is therefore able to drain them of life-force and use this to restore her own remarkable beauty. In this way, Feng Menglong is able to move the portrayal of Lady Xia Ji away from being just a victim suffering in silence, since by mistreating her a series of powerful and important men destroy themselves.

"The Orphan of the Zhao Clan" is included in this abridged edition because of its importance within Western culture, above and beyond its significance in China. This short tale describes how Tu'an Gu (d. 473 B.C.E.), a senior minister in the government of the state of Jin, persuaded Lord Jing of Jin (r. 599–581 B.C.E.) to agree to execute the Zhao clan as punishment for the role of an earlier generation of the family in the murder of the sadistic Lord Ling of Jin (r. 620–607 B.C.E.). Such mass executions were unheard of in other states of the Zhou confederacy, but in Jin, the ruling elite seem to have been exceptionally violent in this regard, and rivalries between different hereditary ministerial clans commonly ended in the deaths of an entire lineage. In this case, in spite of every effort by Tu'an Gu to ensure that nobody escaped, there was one survivor: Zhao Wu (598–541 B.C.E.), then a newborn baby, was successfully smuggled to safety. When he grew up, Zhao Wu appealed to Lord Dao of Jin (r. 573–558 B.C.E.) for justice, and the Tu'an clan were butchered in their turn. This famous tale of revenge would subsequently prove immensely popular and has been retold in countless forms, in fiction, poetry, drama, opera, film, and television. The Yuan dynasty play *The Orphan of Zhao* (*Zhaoshi guer*) was the first Chinese drama to be translated and performed across Europe, and it would have an enormous impact on Western theater in the eighteenth century with numerous adaptations being produced,

including Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine*. However, where these later retellings focus on the orphan's personal revenge, *Kingdoms in Peril* makes it clear that it was Lord Dao of Jin who avenged the Zhao clan. This point is stressed to alert the reader to the importance of the theme of loyalty, which runs through this story. Unpleasant as he was in many ways, Tu'an Gu was utterly loyal to the marquises of Jin, and his belief that the Zhao family had become too powerful was undoubtedly correct. Zhao Wu would consolidate his authority, and his descendants, along with those of Han Jue and others, would eventually destroy Jin. This denouement was entirely made possible by Lord Dao's misplaced benevolence.

"The Downfall of the Kingdom of Wu" is concerned with events beyond the borders of the Zhou confederacy in the ancient kingdoms of Wu in what is now southern Jiangsu Province, and Yue in northern Zhejiang Province. The rise and fall of Wu is given particular prominence in *Kingdoms in Peril* as a whole, which was at least partly due to the fact that the capital city of this ancient kingdom was Feng Menglong's hometown. This story begins with King Fuchai of Wu (r. 495–473 B.C.E.) being determined to take revenge for the death of his grandfather, King Helü (r. 514–496 B.C.E.), who had been killed in battle against Yue. Seeking vengeance for this, King Fuchai defeated King Goujian of Yue (r. 494–465 B.C.E.), who in turn retreated to the mountain fastness at Kuaiji, from which he negotiated a humiliating surrender. After years of being held captive in Wu, the king of Yue finally succeeded in convincing King Fuchai to release him and allow him to return home to his own country. From this vantage point, King Goujian of Yue would spend years secretly building up his forces while ceaselessly conspiring to disrupt and destabilize the government of Wu, before finally accomplishing his revenge—conquering Wu and forcing King Fuchai to commit suicide. In this account, King Goujian is a truly nightmarish figure. The king of Yue proves to be a consummate actor: while held prisoner, he is able to convince King Fuchai that he is utterly harmless and a completely loyal subject; on his return to Yue, his endless machinations cause terrible disruption and loss of life in Wu as the government of this kingdom is hollowed out from the inside. Yet the violence does not stop just because King Goujian has achieved the vengeance against his enemies that he had so long desired, since after the conquest of Wu his paranoid suspicions

become more and more focused on the men who helped him achieve his victory.

"Rival Students of the Master of Ghost Valley" turns the tale to events in the kingdom of Wei during the reign of King Hui (r. 369–319 B.C.E.). This kingdom was created when the vast ancient state of Jin was partitioned at the beginning of the Warring States era, forming the kingdoms of Wei, Zhao, and Han. King Hui of Wei recruited Pang Juan (d. 342 B.C.E.) into his service and gave him command of the army, but subsequently also hired one of his former fellow students, Sun Bin (d. 316 B.C.E.)—a descendant of the famous Sun Wu, the author of *The Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa*). As these two men were supposed to be close friends, King Hui of Wei imagined that they would work well together, but he was unaware that Pang Juan was bitterly jealous of Sun Bin. Determined to destroy his rival, Pang Juan trapped Sun Bin into admissions that he could twist into an appearance of treason, for which the latter suffered the appalling mutilation punishment of having his kneecaps cut out. By various stratagems, however, the crippled Sun Bin was able to escape and find sanctuary in the kingdom of Qi. During the reign of King Wei of Qi (r. 356–320 B.C.E.) he commanded a number of successful campaigns against his enemies—his revenge was complete when Pang Juan was shot to pieces in the Battle of Maling. Although Sun Wu's *The Art of War* has been translated many times into every Western language, rendering its author familiar to anyone interested in the history of military strategy, the career of Sun Bin is much less well-known. Although Sun Bin's own writings, also titled *The Art of War* (*Sun Bin bingfa*), were lost in antiquity, this text was rediscovered in 1972 when a copy was excavated from a Han dynasty tomb at Yinqueshan. This means that today the development of the Sun family school of military thinking can be properly appreciated for the first time in two thousand years.

The last two stories in this collection are concerned with the First Emperor of Qin. "The Family Troubles of the King of Qin" focuses on his family background. At the time of the First Emperor's birth, his father was being held hostage in the kingdom of Zhao: a minor princeling of the Qin ruling house, neglected by his grandfather, King Zhaoxiang of Qin (r. 306–251 B.C.E.), and ignored by his father the crown prince, also known as the Lord of Anguo (later to rule as king of Qin for three days, d. 250 B.C.E.). An intelligent and ambitious man,

the Royal Grandson Yiren (later King Zhuangxiang of Qin, r. 250–247 B.C.E.) survived thanks to the generosity of a wealthy friend, Lü Buwei (d. 235 B.C.E.), who was to mastermind and fund his rise to power in Qin—he arranged that Yiren be adopted by the Lord of Anguo's childless favorite, who in turn ensured his accession to the throne. According to this account (and here Feng Menglong follows Han dynasty propaganda on the subject), Lü Buwei's actions were far from being altruistic; he had presented his pregnant concubine Zhao Ji (d. 228 B.C.E.) to Yiren, and therefore the baby born in captivity in Zhao—the future First Emperor of China—was his own son. On becoming the king of Qin, the future First Emperor found his position assailed by rival half-brothers on both sides of the family. His paternal half-brother, the Lord of Chang'an, would attempt to rise in rebellion against him, claiming to be the true heir to the Qin throne. Meanwhile his mother, who had produced two more children with a new lover, became involved in a plot to murder her oldest son to allow one of these infants to become king. Dealing with these stupid and badly executed conspiracies would leave the First Emperor with virtually no living family members and a reputation for harshness that is perhaps not entirely deserved.

The final story, "The Assassins Strike," is the conclusion of *Kingdoms in Peril.* As children, the future First Emperor of Qin and Crown Prince Dan of Yan (d. 226 B.C.E.) were close friends when they were both held hostage in Zhao. As adults, they turned against each other, and Crown Prince Dan was determined to assassinate his former friend. At this time, the unification of China was imminent; Crown Prince Dan had convinced himself that the only way to prevent the kingdom of Yan from being incorporated into the nascent empire was by disrupting the government of Qin through the targeted assassination of the young king. To this end, he recruited a number of swordsmen, and two of them—Jing Ke (d. 227 B.C.E.) and Qin Wuyang—were entrusted with the task of traveling to Qin to kill the future First Emperor. All too often these events are presented in highly romantic terms, with Crown Prince Dan and Jing Ke in particular being described as a tragically doomed figures. Feng Menglong eschews any such interpretation, preferring to stress the ill-conceived and overhasty nature of the assignment, with the crown prince repeatedly warned by many different people that he was putting everyone's lives

at risk by engaging in such a poorly planned conspiracy. The assassins still set out on their mission, knowing that they were not properly prepared. This realistic note does not detract in the slightest from the true horror and brutality of the final confrontation between the First Emperor and Jing Ke in the royal palace in Xianyang.

THE AUTHOR: FENG MENGLONG

Feng Menglong was born into a gentry family in Suzhou in 1574, as the second of three sons. As with other young men of this kind of privileged background, he was destined for a career in the civil service. However, in spite of numerous attempts to pass the necessary examinations, he consistently failed, as a result of which the stellar career in government which he and his family had hoped for never materialized. In 1630, at the age of fifty-six, his scholarly achievements were finally recognized with appointment as a tribute scholar (*gongsheng*), which opened the way for him to receive a minor official appointment in Dantu County, Jiangsu Province. Having successfully completed this tour of duty, he served for four years as the magistrate of Shouning County in Fujian Province, from 1634 to 1638. On completing this second term of office, he retired and returned to live in Suzhou. That his ambitions to serve as a government official misfired so badly would have one important connection to Feng Menglong's career as an author: each candidate for the civil service examinations was required to study one classical Chinese text. In his case, Feng Menglong chose to specialize in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), a historical text that covers the events of the early Eastern Zhou dynasty. The fact that he never succeeded in passing the examinations should not be seen as a reflection of any lack of diligence, intelligence, or expertise on the subject: he would go on to produce three textbooks that would be regarded as standard works in the field for centuries to come. This academic training and specialism would prove crucial when writing *Kingdoms in Peril.* The language of the primary sources on which he based his novel is extremely difficult and requires many years of study to be able to read. A rigorous scholarly background can also be discerned in the structuring of *Kingdoms in Peril.* Feng Menglong was determined to produce a novel that was as historically accurate as possible, paying close attention to chronology (an issue of particular

importance at a time when many states were using their own calendars), nomenclature, precise geographical locations, and so on. This attention to detail does not add to the literary qualities of the novel per se, but certainly serves to give readers the confidence that they are in the hands of a highly competent author.

Feng Menglong's place of birth was to have a very strong influence on his life and career. During the course of the Ming dynasty, Suzhou had emerged as the commercial capital of China. This ancient city, founded in 514 B.C.E., was originally constructed as the capital of the kingdom of Wu by its penultimate monarch, King Helü. Throughout the imperial era, it continued to be an important regional administrative center, and its location—dominating trade routes along the Yangtze River, the Grand Canal, and through the Lake Tai region—would make it the preeminent commercial hub where goods from every province of the empire were bought and sold. One of the many industries based in Suzhou was that of publishing, with numerous printing presses in operation producing everything from the cheap single-sheet texts handed out as amusing novelty fast-food wrappers to deluxe illustrated editions of the classics printed on the finest paper and elegantly bound for discriminating and wealthy customers. For an educated gentleman needing to make a living, becoming involved in the publishing industry was an obvious step. The majority of Feng Menglong's writings seem to have appeared before he was appointed to a government post in 1630, with the remainder dating to after his retirement in 1638. The dates of first publication of a number of his works are not known, and so the precise chronology of his development as an author remains unclear. However, it is evident that Feng Menglong was an extraordinarily prolific writer who was far from confining himself to a single genre. His popularity was such that a number of works by inferior authors were published with his name on the title page; a great deal of research has been done by modern scholars to identify and remove these spurious works from his oeuvre, and hence they are not included in the list below. However, in addition to writings that were published in his own name, he also appears to have produced some anonymous or pseudonymous works, where an attribution to Feng Menglong remains highly controversial.

The reception of Feng Menglong's writings has varied enormously. While his short story collections have consistently been very much

admired and widely read, other writings that he produced have much more patchy histories. In general, the fall of the Ming dynasty can be said to have brought a significantly more conservative regime to power, and during the Qing dynasty (1645–1911) the government would ban many of Feng Menglong's writings—and indeed a great deal of late Ming literature—as indecent. This would particularly affect the reception of his two collections of folk songs, many of which are sexually explicit and describe pre- or extramarital relationships in positive (and sometimes humorous) terms. These song collections were rendered even more unacceptable by the fact that many pieces were produced in the female voice, and in some cases have explicitly female authorship. Both the *Mountain Songs* and the *Hanging Branches* collections have been virtually unobtainable until very recently. The *Anatomy of Love* was also banned because of the supposedly pornographic nature of the contents—this collection too has suffered neglect until modern times, when reprints have appeared to at last allow people to read these tales of love and lust again. While these writings survive, the impact of bans on Feng Menglong's anonymous and pseudonymous works is much harder to gauge, since by their very nature, their attribution to his authorship is controversial and uncertain. During the early part of his career as a writer, Feng Menglong appears to have authored at least one short erotic novel (and most likely more). This kind of text was subject to extremely strict legal prohibitions during the Qing dynasty and beyond, and hence their role within his development as a writer has not been properly appreciated. However, this part of his oeuvre is particularly important given that one text that has survived, the *Scandalous History of Zhulin,* forms the basis of the tale of Lady Xia Ji in *Kingdoms in Peril.*

During the course of the Qing dynasty, an abridged version of *Kingdoms in Peril* was produced by Cai Yuanfang, an otherwise completely obscure eighteenth-century writer. His revised text, titled *Tales of the States of the Eastern Zhou* (*Dongzhou lieguo zhi*), proved to be enormously popular, to the point where Feng Menglong's original novel ceased to be reprinted. The difficultly of laying hands on a copy of the original text has served to confuse many readers as to the nature and extent of the abridgement. Most of Cai Yuanfang's changes are extremely minor, cutting a sentence here and a poem there. The most significant changes lie in the removal of much of the more sexually

explicit material, which would fit with the conservative agenda of the government of the time and with changing tastes among readers. This English-language abridged edition is based upon Feng Menglong's original text, with the only cuts introduced being those necessary to remove extraneous story lines and some of the longer strings of poetry from the chapters selected for inclusion. The present translation is based upon the critical edition of the text produced by Hu Wanchuan for the Lianjing Publishing Company as part of the *New Printings of Classic Chinese Novels* (*Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo xinkan*) series. The text reproduces the only surviving copy of the first edition, produced by Ye Jingchi—who also published many of Feng Menglong's other writings—which is preserved in the Naikaku Bunko in Japan. The Naikaku Bunko collection of Chinese literature comprises many important Ming and Qing editions purchased for the library maintained by the Tokugawa shoguns, which have not survived elsewhere.

It is not known when exactly *Kingdoms in Peril* was written, and there is no date of publication given on the only surviving copy of the first edition. However, there is a reference in the writings of Qi Biaojia (1603–45) to reading a copy in 1644 on a boat journey back to his hometown. Some scholars have suggested that this novel was published as early as the 1620s, but this would seem to be extremely unlikely for several reasons. First, as a very popular author with a large and devoted readership, it is hard to imagine that a major novel by Feng Menglong could exist for twenty years without anyone mentioning it. The second reason is practical: between 1620 and 1630, Feng Menglong appears to have been fully occupied with other writing projects. He produced a vast body of work during this decade, and the dates of publication of these writings are known. It would seem unlikely that with such a packed schedule it would have been possible to make room for the production of an additional one-hundred-and-eight-chapter novel, particularly one that required very extensive background research. Finally, throughout the novel, Feng Menglong refers to himself as "the old man" or "bearded old man" (*ranweng* or *ranxian*). This term of self-address is also found in other writings dating to the end of his life, and it would seem reasonable that he adopted it in his seventies, rather than in his late forties to early fifties. However, it is certainly true that Feng Menglong was an extraordinarily productive author, and considerable work remains to be done to elucidate the full scope of his literary legacy.